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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR A/S DEWEY; EAP/BCLTV; DRL/IRF

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TAGS: PREF PHUM PGOV PREL PINS SOCI KIRF VM CB RELFREE HUMANR ETMIN
SUBJECT: A/S DEWEY IN VIETNAM'S CENTRAL HIGHLANDS: KON TUM
PROVINCE

REFS: A) HCMC 0450 B) 02 HCMC 0336

¶11. (U) Summary: In a visit to Kon Tum Province, PRM Assistant Secretary Dewey met with Provincial People's Committee Chairwoman Y Veng and with the province's Committee on Ethnic Minority and Religious Affairs. He also visited a village in Ia Sia commune where 15 UNHCR-repatriated ethnic minorities returned in 2002. Ia Sia commune appears little changed from previous visits -- impoverished and the UNHCR-repatriated refugees still somewhat discontented and not completely integrated back into daily life. Life in the village is hard for ethnic minority and Kinh alike. Generally well-meaning GVN programs are under-funded, fall behind on implementation, and sometimes increase frustration. The personal stories of discrimination told A/S Dewey by several returnees seem to be genuine, yet it is difficult to judge what part of their plight stems from systemic targeted mistreatment and what part is simply due to impoverished conditions in Ia Sia/Kon Tum as a whole. The treatment of ethnic minorities -- and specifically their ability to worship freely -- depends on the personalities and attitudes of the local authorities, down to the very lowest level. End Summary.

"MAY I CONTINUE NOW?"

¶12. (U) Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugee and Migration Affairs Gene Dewey traveled to Kon Tum Province in Vietnam's Central Highlands on August 16. DCM, Acting CG HCMC, RRS Chief, and EAP/BCLTV officer Jess accompanied him. The delegation met with the People's Committee chairwoman Y Veng, her first meeting with U.S. officials in at least 18 months. (On six previous visits she had been in Hanoi as a National Assembly member or traveling outside Kon Tum.) The scowling Madame Veng read carefully from ten pages of prepared remarks and looked vexed every time A/S Dewey interrupted to raise the treatment of ethnic minorities and freedom of religion or ask other questions. After answering each question, she would look at A/S Dewey and ask, "May I continue now?"

¶13. (U) Ms. Y Veng described GVN programs geared toward improving living conditions for ethnic minority groups in Kon Tum. She emphasized access to free or low cost health care and educational opportunities, including special ethnic minority boarding schools and subsidized tuition at regular schools. She noted that there were 137,266 religious believers in Kon Tum of which 87,847 were from ethnic minorities. The total believers included 100,021 Catholics (77,000 minority members), 26,561 Buddhists, and 10,337 Protestants (10,228 minority). She also said that there were 92 religious facilities, 13 churches, 1 big Catholic church (sic), 47 worship places, 50 pagodas, and 3 monasteries. She invited Mission staff to attend the installation of a new bishop, which would occur in late August. Chairwoman Y Veng observed that the "legal" religious associations were making an important contribution to the province and its people.

¶14. (U) A/S Dewey asked about reports that some Protestant religious groups had been denied access to certain health and education benefits. The Chairwoman replied a little defensively that Kon Tum province did not discriminate against Christians, but that limited resources precluded guaranteeing every potential student a place in the boarding schools. When A/S Dewey asked about visiting a school, Ms. Y Veng said Dakglei District had an ethnic minority boarding school where there were some Christians attending. A/S Dewey noted a firsthand visit would be important in further understanding conditions Kon Tum, and said that although his schedule was very tight this time, ConGenoffs would visit the school in the future.

¶15. (U) A/S Dewey noted that American NGOs and USAID were interested in providing assistance to the Central Highlands, possibly in the areas of child health and reproductive health. The Chairwoman said "these services are already available," but she would be happy to work with these organizations and greatly appreciated their offers.

However, the central government makes all decisions on assistance programs, not provincial authorities. She said she would get back to the Mission concerning the offer.

16. (U) According to Chairwoman Y Veng, the GVN has a consistent policy of freedom of religion, and in general, any group or association recognized by the government can gather people together. However, certain groups, such as the Dega movement, misuse religious groups for their own political purposes. She asserted that the Dega movement had enticed people to cross the border into Cambodia. A/S Dewey clarified that the USG does not support the Dega movement or any movement seeking autonomy. The USG, however, does support religious freedoms, free speech, human rights, and economic development. He urged GVN authorities to distinguish between the small minority abusing religious belief for political purposes and the much larger group of genuine worshipers.

RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS CHIEF: PROTESTANTS BUT NO CHURCHES

17. (U) Following the meeting with the provincial People's Committee, A/S Dewey met with the Committee on Ethnic Minority and Religious Affairs' chairman, Mr. Ro Mo So Ra. Several of the same points concerning freedom of worship for non-political believers were discussed. Mr. Ro said there are no recognized Protestant churches in Kon Tum province at this time (although Chairwoman Y Veng had previously stated there were approximately 10,000 Protestants in the province). Mr. Ro subsequently indicated that indeed there were Protestants in Kon Tum, and that they indeed were worshipping in their homes or in non-recognized churches. He said local authorities generally turned a blind eye to their worship services as long as they stuck to religion and did not engage in illegal political activities. As for the process of registering new churches, Mr. Ro emphasized that his committee's role is purely advisory. Decision-making authority to register churches lies with the People's Committee. A/S Dewey encouraged Mr. Ro to work for the recognition of legitimate congregations, who sincerely want to simply worship together, and to not treat such groups as a security or political threat.

BOTTOM'S UP - Y VENG'S REVENGE

18. (U) Chairwoman Y Veng had graciously invited A/S Dewey and delegation for lunch. In contrast to her rather cool reception during the formal meeting in her office earlier that day, Y Veng was considerably more relaxed, cordial and talkative. She also taught several of those on the American delegation a thing or two about a tool of diplomacy frequently employed here: proposing a toast before virtually every bite of food. She told A/S Dewey that her soldier husband laughed when she told him that drinking was part of her job.

VISIT TO RAT/RAC VILLAGE

19. (SBU) Following the lunch, A/S Dewey visited Rat (Rac) village, Ia Sia commune in Sa Thay district, near the Cambodian border. The UNHCR has repatriated 15 refugees to this village since February 2002. In a two-hour visit, A/S Dewey, the DCM and Acting Consul General fanned out to talk with various returnees. The obvious presence of plainclothes police mixed in with the villagers may have inhibited their willingness to talk freely. Still, several of them spoke out candidly about their lives and in some cases the problems they faced. The villagers had just finished celebrating a local ethnic festival and consumed considerable alcohol in the process; this may have loosened tongues a bit. (Post Note: Compared to 18 months ago, when the security forces videotaped each village encounter, the police presence was relatively lighter.)

10. (SBU) Sui Toi (20 years old) and Ro Cham Khuyen (23 years old), both unmarried, are two Jarai ethnic minority men. They said they had returned to Vietnam on February 19, 2002. UNHCR had advised them that the Vietnamese Government would provide land and a job to anyone who returned. However, when they arrived at the Gia Lai province border last year, local policemen "beat (them) ruthlessly." Currently, they are living with their sisters' families. Ro Cham Khuyen whispered that he dared not "tell everything" to the visitors or he would have a "big problem" with local policemen when the delegation left. He said that there are no schools for the children in Ia Sia village, there is no health clinic in or near the village, and Ia Sia had not yet been electrified. (Post Note: While there is sometimes confusion between using the terms "village" and "commune" in the provinces, there definitely is an elementary school in

Ia Sia commune, and its main road is electrified, though it is likely houses further back in the hills are not. It is common practice for the poorer provinces to set up health clinics to serve several villages and/or communes from a central location. Post does not wish to make light of Ro Cham Khuyen's claims, but they are inaccurate. We also note that in previous discussions with residents of other Central Highlands villages, the concept of "near" has elicited responses ranging from approximately 60 feet to one mile. End note.)

¶11. (SBU) Sui Toi indicated he was a Protestant, but said after his return to Vietnam he could no longer attend church, because any time he wanted to leave his village he had to obtain local police approval. Some other villagers cautiously approached ConGenoff to hand over samples of police "invitations" to interviews. One was an "invitation" from the district police chief (an ethnic Vietnamese Kinh) to come to the Sa Thay district police station "to meet Mr. Dung of the security section." Another was from the Ia Sia police chief (also an ethnic Vietnamese Kinh) asking the recipient to come to discuss some "necessary matters." One resident handed over a note showing he had been "approved" by a village policeman to visit his foster mother's home in another village to borrow money to buy a bicycle.

¶12. (SBU) A ConGen FSN spoke briefly with a third returnee. This 24-year old ethnic minority man said he had returned in March 2002, but is jobless and has long since spent the VND500,000 (USD\$33 - average per capita annual income in Kon Tum is about USD\$205) that the UNHCR gave him for resettlement. He claimed local policemen had beaten him when he returned to Vietnam. He said he would be beaten again after the American delegation left, but "the truth was always the truth and that if the authorities killed him he was happy to die in his homeland."

¶13. (SBU) A Rung Ho Lung, a 41-year old Jarai man, told A/S Dewey that one of the reasons he left for Cambodia was because his family was not allowed to worship in his village home. ConGen Pol/Econ assistant then spoke with the chairman of the Ia Sia Commune People's Committee and the tribal chief of Rat/Rac Village. The chairman said local authorities did not forbid Christian worship, but it was possible that the tribe itself did not approve of such practices. The tribal chief responded that Christianity was not part of his tribe's cultural heritage. A/S Dewey asked both the chairman and the tribal chief to allow believers to practice their faith, since they gather peacefully and not for any political purpose. The chairman did not promise, but said it was really a tribal decision. The tribal chief was reluctant to make a commitment.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) As with previous visits to Ia Sia, the situation appears mixed. While accurate information may exist in snapshots of the moment, consistently verifiable information is a completely different story. Kon Tum province is very poor. Many of its problems - depressed agricultural economy, unemployment, lack of arable land - affect everybody, including the Vietnamese Kinh. Government programs, while well-meaning on paper, are under-funded in implementation, fall behind on their timetables, and increase frustration.

¶15. (SBU) In addition, the frequent attention paid to Rat village by American and other foreign visitors may have resulted in heightened local government sensitivities and tension in this village. The personal stories told by the four returnees seem to be genuine, yet it is difficult to judge what part of their plight stems from systemic targeted mistreatment and what part is simply due to impoverished conditions in Ia Sia/Kon Tum as a whole. On this visit, as with others, it is clear that the treatment of ethnic minorities -- and specifically their ability to worship freely -- depends on the personalities and attitudes of the local authorities, down to the very lowest level. End comment.

¶16. (U) A/S Dewey did not see this cable before departure.

YAMAUCHI